

THEY SAID THERE WAS NO DANGER

VOLCANO SURVIVORS RECALL A NIGHT OF HORROR, HEROES AND DEATH

From the Houston Chronicle on November 20, 1985

ARMERO, Colombia - The old volcano had rumbled for months, spitting a little ash and gas now and then, but it had done no harm for a century and no one thought it would now. Its last major eruption was in 1595, while Spanish explorers watched from the distance.

Between 3 and 4 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 13, ash began floating down on Armero, a farming town in the lush Andes valley at the base of the Nevado del Ruiz volcano.

Smoke drifted upward from the snow-capped cone three miles above Armero.

Some people were apprehensive enough to leave, but most of the 28,000 to 30,000 people in the main part of town, nestled in a bend of the Lagunilla River, did not want to abandon their homes and crops.

The radio said there was nothing to worry about; it was not the first grumble from the mountain. Many people seldom even glanced up at it any more because it had always been there, like the river or the trees.

Marco Aurelio Gonzalez kept on selling lottery tickets.

"I didn't think anything of it," he said later. "It was my wife who was nervous."

The hot ash was heavier by 5:30 p.m., and pebbles were mixed in. The ash continued to come down through the evening, heavier and lighter by turns. Rain began to fall.

Children and some adults went to bed. Gonzalez dropped off the money from his ticket sales at the lottery office and went home for dinner at 9:30. His wife listened to the radio as he ate.

"They said there was no danger, no cause for alarm, even at 10 o'clock at night," he said.

Maria Alicia Munoz Corredor had just nursed her 18-month-old daughter Yibe, but the baby was restless.

"I got into bed and held her near my body. Then there was a loud noise, but I thought something big had fallen to the floor and I hugged my little girl close to me again," she said.

"I remember that Yibe smiled and began to nurse, when all of a sudden I felt another great rumble and with it a voice screaming and screaming to please run into the street because something bad was happening."

At 9:10 p.m., Mayor Ramon Antonio Rodriguez of Armero had called an amateur radio operator in a nearby town to tell him about the new rain of ash from Nevado del Ruiz.

Suddenly, Rodriguez said: "Wait a minute. The water's come into town."

That remark to radio ham Jesus Antonio Rivera was the last anyone heard from the mayor of this town in western Colombia, 105 miles northwest of Bogota, the capital.

Several survivors said the mud swept into Armero at about 10 p.m., but they dwelt more on the sound of the 150-foot-high wall of mud that thundered down the river canyon.

"One of the younger children who still lived with us woke us up at 11 screaming that it was raining burning sand on the roof," Gilberto Villegas said.

"We left with what we had on and ran to the closest hill. From there we saw people screaming until they were swallowing mud. With other

neighbors we managed to save four, but many others disappeared in seconds."

His six grown sons, who lived in other houses with their own families, are missing.

Black sand and water rushed down the street in front of Munoz's house. A hard rain was falling.

She grabbed Yibe in one arm and her son Carlos in the other. Then, suddenly, she was floating in mud, clutching her daughter in her arms, her son in sight a few feet away.

A wave of mud and rock tore Yibe away. She could see the baby for several minutes, "floating like a piece of paper on the water and crying." Munoz reached Yibe twice, and touched her hands several times, but each time the slippery mud stole the child again.

Munoz remembered that she had not seen Carlos again. "Wanting to die with my children, I threw myself into the mud, but unfortunately the current carried me to a truck where three badly injured men took me by the hand and saved me." she said.

"Finally she was devoured by a wave of gravel."

Gonzalez the ticket seller, his wife, three children and a cousin ran for a hill two blocks away, saw the mud and turned back. They were swept away.

He was pulled under by the current but was thrust back to the surface on a second wave of mud. He caught a piece of zinc roofing and floated on it until he was thrown onto the top of a pickup truck.

Rescuers reported finding 13 more survivors Tuesday. The RCN radio network said 22 people were found alive Monday, a day after the government attempted to call off rescue efforts, believing there was no hope of finding additional survivors.